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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001213

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: HUNGER-STRIKING KOZULIN DENIED FAMILY CONTACT

REF: A. MINSK 731

[1](#)B. MINSK 965

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) At a recent opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) press conference held in support of imprisoned BSDP chair and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, Kozulin's wife discussed how authorities repeatedly denied her husband family contact and legal counsel. BSDP leaders believe the GOB may be concealing Kozulin's health condition and/or forcing Kozulin to end the hunger strike he began on October 20. The conference participants were unified in calling on Kozulin supporters and representatives of the international community to show support for Kozulin by sending him post cards, but they remain divided on the political impact of Kozulin's and other BSDP activists' ongoing hunger strike. Meanwhile, the Embassy continues its efforts to visit Kozulin in prison. End Summary.

Kozulin Denied Contact with Family and Legal Counsel

[1](#)2. (U) On November 14, the opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Gramada" (BSDP) held a press conference regarding its ongoing campaign demanding the release of imprisoned BSDP chair and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin, who is serving a five and half year prison sentence for alleged "hooliganism" and disturbing the peace (ref A). During the press conference, Kozulin's wife Irina Kozulina stated that prison authorities have denied her all contact with Kozulin since he began his hunger strike on October 20 in protest against the start of President Aleksandr Lukashenko's fraudulently elected third term in office. Kozulina revealed that she is permitted to send letters to her husband.

[1](#)3. (C) Kozulina confirmed to Poloff press reports that prison authorities prevented her from visiting her husband at Vitsba-3 prison colony on November 8 and told her that she likely would not be allowed to have contact with Kozulin until January 17. Kozulina also noted that authorities continue to deny Kozulin contact with his defense attorney Igor Rynkevich on the grounds that the "stress" from talking with his lawyer might worsen his health, already "threatened" by his hunger strike. (Note: Rynkevich separately verified to Emboffs that prison authorities have prohibited him from consulting with Kozulin. End note.) Kozulina again attempted to visit her husband in prison on November 16, but was turned away by the prison administration.

14. (C) After the press conference, senior BSDP member and human rights attorney Oleg Volchek related to Poloff his suspicions that the GOB is withholding contacts with family members and legal counsel to coerce Kozulin into ending his hunger strike. BSDP Deputy Chair Aleksey Korol agreed with Volchek and speculated that the authorities may be attempting to conceal the true extent of Kozulin's health problems. Both Volchek and Korol cited an inquiry on the previous day from prison authorities to Kozulin's wife regarding Kozulin's normal blood pressure as cause for deep concern. (Note: On November 8, Kozulin's daughter and BSDP attorney Olga Kozulina told Poloff that she had met with Kozulin on October 16 and described pre-hunger strike Kozulin as lethargic and malnourished. Former political prisoner Sergey Skrebets, who was released from Vitsba-3 on November 15, reported that Kozulin had lost approximately 20 percent of his body weight since October 20. End note.)

Family and Supporters Divided on Hunger Strikes

15. (U) During the press conference, Volchek declared his own hunger strike in "spiritual" support of Kozulin. Two Minsk BSDP youth activists, Nadezhda Baltura and Aleksandr Streltsov, announced that they had been fasting for three days to express their solidarity for the dozens of Kozulin supporters who are fasting in the Belarusian cities of Brest, Baranovich, Grodno and the Ukrainian town of Kovel. Baltura described herself to Poloff as a weak person but articulated her determination to continue the strike for at least another five days. Streltsov echoed Brest BSDP Head Igor Maslovskiy's recent call for Kozulin's supporters to fast periodically for four to five days at a time.

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16. (U) BSDP Acting Chair Anatoliy Levkovich expressed doubts about expanding the fast on the grounds that past mass hunger strikes have caused "much cry and hue" and remained largely unnoticed by the Belarusian public. Neither endorsing nor criticizing the hunger strikes, Kozulina and BSDP activist Raisa Mikhailovskaya urged Kozulin supporters and representatives of the international community to send post cards to Kozulin at Vitsba-3 by November 25, Kozulin's birthday. (Note: On November 14, Kozulina reiterated to independent media her hope that Kozulin would end his hunger strike in the coming days. End note.)

17. (C) Korol admitted to Poloff his ambivalence about Kozulin's hunger strike and intimated that Kozulina was reluctant to endorse the activists' hunger strikes because of her desire for her husband to end his fast. However, Korol conceded that the growing number of hunger strikers and support for the post card campaign proved that Kozulin's fast was an effective means of communication with the Belarusian public.

Embassy Again Presses for Access to Hunger Striking Kozulin

18. (U) On November 2, the Embassy sent the MFA a diplomatic note renewing our request to visit Kozulin. Authorities had denied previous Embassy requests to visit Kozulin because legal appeal procedures were ongoing (ref B). On October 31, prison authorities permitted OSCE Head of Mission Ambassador Ake Peterson to meet with Kozulin. Shortly after the visit, Peterson described Kozulin to Ambassador as "in good mental spirits" but "physically weakened."

Comment

19. (C) Speculation among Kozulin's family members and supporters that the authorities are preventing Kozulin's family from visiting Kozulin until mid-January in order to

force Kozulin to end his hunger strike is probably correct. The regime undoubtedly recognizes that force-feeding Kozulin or allowing him to continue his strike to its natural conclusion both carry high political costs in the international arena. Regardless of whether such a GOB extortion effort succeeds or fails, the Embassy will press on in seeking access to Kozulin.

Stewart